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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted at John Abbott College in Quebec to determine the frequency and intensity of life-change events that had occurred in women's lives in the two-year period prior to college entry and their impact on the women's participation in the college. It was hoped that such information could be used to design intervention strategies at earlier times, offering additional varieties of academic and support programs, and designing a curriculum that would be more relevant and meaningful to this new group of students. The population for the study was composed of women volunteers from the college's several-years-old Adult Learner's Program and its Intensive French Program. These women completed a questionnaire, the Schedule of Recent Experience (SRE), and 20 women were selected from the group for in-depth interviews because of their high stress scores. Data gathered showed that although the occurrence of a number of life-change events had been reported on the SRE by the group of returning women students, these events either did not appear to represent the most significant life events, did not occur at all, or did not occur in the two-year period prior to re-entry. Some events, such as death or divorce, were reported, but they seemed to serve as long-term motivating factors coupled with the women's perception of the need for personal growth and preparation for employment as they faced the future after finishing their maternal role. One life event triggering reentry for several women, however, was moving or having someone close to them move. The women surveyed said that attendance in the two-year college program was a rewarding personal growth experience. (KC)

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THE IMPACT OF LIFE CHANGE EVENTS ON WOMEN'S DECISIONS TO RETURN TO COLLEGE

(Women Over 25: Reentering the Unending Learning Process)

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It is rapidly becoming apparent that increasing numbers of adults are furthering their learning. However, the doors of educational institutions have not always been open to older students, many of whom have found traditional campus learning threatening, irrelevant to their concerns and ill-suited to time, money and family realities.

John Abbott College, a Quebec CEGEP (Collège d'Enseignement Général et Professionnel) is certainly a College that did not meet the needs of many adult students, since it is one which offers pre-university and technology programs to approximately 4,000 full-time day students, the vast majority of whom are between the ages of 17 and 20.

It had become obvious to us at the College that there was an adult population whose educational needs were not being met, mainly those of homemakers who wanted to attend school during the day, at times when family responsibilities did not require their presence at home, and in an environment that would facilitate their learning and recognize their needs vis-à-vis resistration, admission, advising, counselling, transportation, day care services, block scheduling and flexible hours.

In order to better understand the programs that were begun several years ago, one should better understand the post-secondary educational system in Quebec as well as some of the language challenges that face the English-speaking population.

Approximately 12 years ago, the provincial government reduced the high school to completion after grade 11, reduced the bachelor degree requirements to three years and inserted a two year pre-university diploma program as an admission requirement to all Quebec universities. These programs, in arts and sciences, are tuition-free and government-subsidized, and available only to those students who attend on a full-time basis.

It seemed important to us, therefore, to structure programs for adults that would meet their needs as defined before, and, as well, qualify them to come in as tuition-free students.

The Adult Learner's Program was initiated in 1979 and sixty students registered in a social science pre-university program and took four courses (English, Humanities, Psychology and French) so that they could be considered as full-time students, with tuition subsidized by the Quebec government. At the present time, there are approximately 113 students, both returning and new. During the first two semesters, only women registered.

One of the most important features is in the selection of the teachers. Faculty were carefully selected and those that were student-centered, competent and committed were selected to teach in this program.

Although the choice of courses and program was initially done by staff members, it was hoped that students would take responsibility for their own learning within a short time, and in fact, this is occurring.

Another program designed primarily for homemakers, in similar time blocks to the Adult Learner's Program, is the Intensive French Program. These courses of study consist of a group of four sequential language courses, packaged together to enable students to qualify as tuition-free full-time students and to enable persons who require the use of one of the official languages to become proficient enough to be able to use French in their daily work and life, a requirement becoming necessary since the passage of Bill 101, the official language act of Quebec. Within the past two years, it has become virtually impossible to qualify for employment without second language skills. As well, admission to all professional corporations includes a French language proficiency qualification, which is quite rigorously enforced within a given time period.

The mature student frequently is not understood by faculty and staff. As a way of gaining additional insight, a study was initiated to explore women's previous life events and their impact on decisions to go to College.

The purpose of this study was to determine the frequency and intensity of life-change events that have occurred in women's lives in a two-year period prior to College entry and their impact on women's participation in the College, in the hope of designing intervention strategies at earlier times, offering additional varieties of academic and support programs, and continuing to design a curriculum that would be more relevant and meaningful to this new group of students.

The women volunteers were recruited from the two programs previously discussed - the Adult Learner's Program and the Intensive French Program.

The methodology employed in this study was that of the completion of a paper-and-pencil questionnaire, Schedule of Recent Experience (SRE), by the total population of 77, coupled with individual in-depth interviews with 20 women who reported high scores on the Social Readjustment Rating Scale.

The project was a two-part study. Initially, respondents completed both background demographic information sheets along with the Schedule of Recent Experience, an instrument which provided a numerical stress score for each of the two years prior to re-entry.

The second part of the study consisted of in-depth interviews with 20 women who had been selected because their reported stress

scores fell within the highest ranges in the Social Readjustment Rating Scale, irrespective of whether it was in the 0-12 month period or in the 1-2 year period prior to re-entry.

This study provided data in the occurrence of life-change events for a group of 77 women who were given the Schedule of Recent Experience, from which a stress score for each one was obtained. From an analysis of their stress scores, a group of 20 women was selected to become the focus group, and these women were the subjects for in-depth individual interviews, to determine the impact of these events on their return to college. A statistical

analysis of the focus group did not reveal any significant differences in the demographic variables from the non-focused group. Their stress scores for each of the two years prior to re-entry were analyzed and revealed no differences in any factor for the 0-12 month period prior to entry, and a significant difference in the one to two year period in three factors: finance, lifestyle and family.

A demographic profile for the group at large was produced, and this revealed a woman of age 38.6, married, in her first marriage, who had completed high school, has several children, was previously employed full-time for 4-6 years in a secretarial/clerical position with family household income reported in the range of $25,000 to $30,000.

The stress scores and the interview data were studied in several different ways. The first comparison was with the set of stress scores and ranges defined by the instrument developers. The greatest number of women scored in the category "Mild Life Crisis".

The interviews corroborated the data collected in the SRE questionnaire when the comparison was made. However, during the interviews it was found that 60% of the women spent a great amount of time discussing other salient issues, and this varied from 1% to 17% more time, indicating that the life-change events as identified on the Schedule of Recent Experience were, in their frame of reference, not the most critical items in the interview.

Choices for women today are usually in two directions - school or work. Although the women in this study had all chosen the school option, it cannot be assumed that for all it was their first choice. For those who had no second language skills it was often difficult, if not impossible, to obtain anything more than a menial job in the Quebec labour market, where French is the language of business and communication, and this placed an additional burden on women who wanted to return to the labour market.

There appeared to be a schema of development in these women's lives, verified by their own reports, which seems to be the following, with one or two notable exceptions. It was apparent that a series of events occurred in these women's lives rather than a single event, not within a specific time period but rather occurring as part of an ongoing process, significant enough to cause a change in their self-perception. The three major life-change events that seemed to lead to reflection and introspection were death, separation and change in residence.

Some of these events raised identity issues for the women and they began asking themselves a series of questions about who they were, what they wanted out of life and what they were going to do with the rest of their lives. At this point in their lives, continuing education was not something that they had thought about or planned for. After a period of reflection

and introspection for some, and spontaneous action for others, they enrolled in the College as re-entry students. It was not clear whether this re-entry could be considered a result of the earlier events or a continuation of them. There was recognition and acknowledgment of their dependent state, with expressed discomfort and desire for change.

The subsequent major change in these women's lives was their re-entry into education. As mentioned earlier, some might have preferred to enter the labour market but were unable to do so because of a skill deficit in the area of French language, verbal or written, or both. Thus, the avenue for exploration and self-development that they chose was education. A few talked about triggering events, but most expressed a somewhat lengthy period of time, often bringing to fruition previous desires to attend higher education, aspirations which they had not really planned for or expected to become reality.

Previous societal expectations and socializations did not lead these women to have career-oriented goals but rather they were imprinted with the message that girls didn't really need a higher education because major objectives in life for women were to get married, have children and raise them, and remain within that role definition throughout their lives. However, in light of rapidly advancing social and technological changes, coupled with a longer life span, these women were now confronted with 25 - 35 years of being without the maternal role. This could

also be coupled with the emergence of the women's movement and the various social changes that have occurred along with it. Thus women who were born in the 1940's and 1950's may have gained inner resources for their mature years from the relaxation of restrictions during those decades. Broader horizons for women may have made a second lease on life possible for them.

The choices of school for these women brought additional changes in their lives, and with these changes came a new set of questions in the area of their academic potential, the support of their families in their efforts, the desire for independence and other questions related to identity. In each step along the way there were self-perception changes and checks. Often there were no resolutions to the questions they began asking themselves at that time. As the women added student to their existing role of mother, wife and homemaker, they began to look at a reallocation of priorities, and a new definition of self, along with an accompanying assertion of their requirements to make these changes.

Disengagement, particularly from the family of procreation, became evident at this time, and perhaps the very fact of enrolling in the College was a form of psychological disengagement, or the beginning of that process. Separation from the family was a theme that was often expressed by the focus group.

The women continued to report changes in themselves as a result of their school experiences. Changes in self-perception now included a new sense of self-confidence, growth in self-awareness, personal stamina and power, a sense of accomplishment and the realization by the woman of being a person in her own right.

The women who have been in the College for the longest period of time reported more changes in the areas listed above than did the first semester women. A study of their interviews gave the reader a sense of more integrated women, who were less emotional in their descriptions, who were more reflective and who had less self-doubt. Possibly because of the longer time spent in the College, they were better able to step away from the experience and view it more globally in an historical perspective. They also appeared to be more candid about the dissonance in the family, which can be assumed to be the result of their participation in the College.

There were also indications that these women experienced personal growth, in which the movement could be described on a continuum from a dependent state, to one of independence, with the potential for autonomy as the most advanced stage of growth. Thus the pattern was bimodial, internal and external. A series of events occurred (external) which was coupled with self-perception checks and changes (internal).

The focus group appeared to be a cautious one, with women who spoke of planning, of moving step by step, who referred to the gradualness of their process, and this way of thinking could have been a function of their past experience or future anticipated moves.

When given the opportunity to retrace their lives before re-entry, these women described events prior to the two-year period, usually occurring as a series, and their return was often as a result of or a continuation of these events. The most notable exception was the single event "change in residence", with 50% of the women reporting a change in the two-year period prior to re-entry and several prior to that time. This appeared to be a mobile, transient population, more as a factor of the spouse's occupation and socio-economic status than in the woman's own right. For some women, it appeared to be a major event over which they had little or no control.

The women reported on the occurrence of these life-change events as part of an ongoing process, with each one outlining a somewhat different configuration of events. The events as such were not described as dramatic or traumatic, with several notable exceptions being divorce and a move from one country to another reported by two women. Most women anticipated the transitions, or events, and seemed to have done some anticipatory preparation for them.

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The interviews revealed the possibility that other life-change events occurred in women's lives, and two were mentioned by several women in the focus group, that of the departure of very close friends, leaving a vacuum in one woman's life, and the separation of women from the family, other than the one of procreation.

Some general comments throughout the interviews indicated that the women felt the questionnaire was not appropriate for them, women's lives could not be described by a simplistic instrument such as this and that each woman was unique and it would be difficult to categorize them via a questionnaire. In the study the instrument was useful in pointing out the most frequently reported life-change events for the group, and as a selection tool in defining the focus group.

The data collected, both in the SRE and in the interviews, revealed that this focus group of women did not perceive these life-change events to be the most significant factors in terms of the time they spent discussing them or in relationship to other salient areas that were elaborated on throughout the interview. The two-year period prior to re-entry did not appear adequate to describe significant life-change events in these women's lives.

The conclusions reached are based largely on the interviews with women who have returned to college after a prolonged period away from the educational milieu and on the data reported on the Schedule of Recent Experience questionnaire (SRE).

Although the occurrence of a number of life-change events had been reported on the SRE by a group of returning women students, at the time of further exploration, these events either did not appear to represent the most significant life events, did not occur at all or did not occur in the two-year period prior to re-entry. When given the opportunity to describe their lives prior to re-entry, these women highlighted other areas as being more significant to the, with several notable exceptions.

It appeared that a number of life-change events, either individually or in a series of occurrences, acted in a way that could be considered a motivating factor on a subsequent decision to return to school for the focus group of women.

A return to education for women can be viewed as a positive growth experience, as reflected in personal statements by the women, and changes in self-perception including a new sense of self-confidence, growth in self-awareness and a sense of accomplishment.

A factor unique to this population was the issue of French language. The need for English educational planners in Quebec to offer

language programs to English-speaking women is essential in helping them overcome this perceived and real barrier to re-entry into the labour market.